

# Moderate Secularism: Constructing a Language of Possibility for Religion in Public Education

BARBARA K. CURRY  
NEIL O. HOUSER

*People often resist that which they fear or misunderstand. When this resistance precludes the reflection and compromise needed to promote societal well-being, it becomes a legitimate focus of social education. Nowhere has the fear been greater or the resistance more rigid than in the debate over religion in public education. This article examines the current status of religion in education and considers the implications for policy making and practice. A brief history of religion in education and two recent cases challenging educational policy are used to frame the discussion. The article concludes with a proposal for a "moderate secularism," an alternative approach to policy and practice based on a language of possibility for addressing religion in public education.*

PEOPLE OFTEN resist that which they fear or misunderstand (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). When this resistance precludes the self-reflection and personal compromise needed to promote societal well-being, it becomes a legitimate focus of social education (Baldwin, 1988; Banks, 1987; Kohl,

---

**AUTHORS' NOTE:** This article was coauthored in the truest sense of the word. The arrangement of the names is strictly alphabetical. We contributed equally to the conceptual development, writing, and revisions.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY, Vol. 11 No. 1, March 1997 41-57  
© 1997 Corwin Press, Inc.

1988). Nowhere has the fear been greater—or the resistance more rigid—than in the debate over the role of religion in public education (Kaplan, 1994; Marzano, 1993/1994; McQuaide & Pliska, 1993/1994; Noddings, 1992; Provenzo, 1990; Rippa, 1992; Slattery, 1995). As with many controversial problems (Giroux, 1985; Greene, 1988), addressing the fear and resistance related to religion in education requires new forms of thought and discussion. In the words of Giroux, such challenges require “a discourse that combines the language of critique with the language of possibility” (1985, p. 379).

This study examines the current status of the debate over religion in education and considers the implications for policy making and practice. The critique begins with a brief review of the history of religion in American education. It continues with two examples of challenges to educational policy in Pennsylvania and New York. The discussion concludes with a proposal for a “moderate secularism,” an alternative approach to policy and practice based on a language of possibility for addressing religion in public education.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF RELIGION IN EDUCATION

Throughout our nation’s history, the relationship between religion and education has been complex, multifaceted, and continually evolving. Among other factors, it has been influenced by prevailing religious doctrines, varying cultures and social conditions, competing political and economic interests, and legal precedents and parameters established by our courts of law. Many public policies and current educational practices are grounded in the views of early American leaders, the Constitutional laws that emerged from those views, and subsequent judicial decisions. The separation of church and state, for example, is rooted in the determination to maintain, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, “eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man” (quoted in Rippa, 1992, p. 68).<sup>1</sup> To that end, the First Amendment was framed: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Although general parameters have been established by the legal system, these guidelines are often insufficient to address the countless complicated issues that arise each day within particular educational contexts. Even seemingly unambiguous doctrines, such as the separation of church and state, have failed to provide clear consensus on the role of religion in American education (Rippa, 1992). The nature of the problem can be more clearly understood by briefly examining historical issues and recent developments related to religion in public education.

Debates over the role of religion in public education have existed for centuries (Cremin, 1977; Rippa, 1992). Even before the founding of the United States, opinions regarding religion and education varied among European colonists. Whereas many northern colonists viewed education as a vehicle for evangelism, southern colonists typically believed religion was a private matter for church and family rather than a civic or governmental responsibility. Although a variety of factors (e.g., internal migration, changing economic conditions) have blurred the boundaries, ongoing social relationships, prevailing religious activities, and persistent political trends nonetheless indicate that significant regional distinctions continue to exist even in the waning years of the 20th century.

In addition to regional differences, the debate over religion in education has been fueled by increased population growth, the cultural diversification of the nation, industrial and technological developments, increased urbanization, a shrinking middle class, and so forth. In response to these changing conditions, both religious and educational institutions have sought to assimilate diverse populations into the prevailing structures, norms, and practices of society (Baldwin, 1988; Banks, 1987; Kohl, 1988; Ogbu, 1987; Rippa, 1992; Zinn, 1990). Insofar as these efforts have imposed religious ideologies and denied religious freedoms, they have often met with fierce opposition.

Finally, ideological divisions have slowly increased through gradual shifts from religion to reason (Rippa, 1992), evolving theories of multiple intelligences and diverse ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gardner, 1985; Sternberg, 1987), and a growing belief that reality, morality, and even spirituality may be socially constructed rather than absolute (Berger, 1967; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The gradual evolution of the Age of Reason, emphasizing the need and ability of humans to understand, control, and improve themselves and their environment, has posed a significant threat to those who advocate complete faith in (a particular interpretation of the will of) God and the relinquishing of personal control over one's own life in favor of (a particular version of) God's will (Peshkin, 1986; Provenzo, 1990).

In addition to the growing emphasis on human ability to understand, interpret, and improve oneself and one's environment through rational thought, some scholars have begun to develop theories of multiple intelligences and alternative ways of knowing. For example, theorists such as Belenky et al. (1986) have argued that women's ways of knowing are often qualitatively different (e.g., private, intuitive, connected) but no less important than the rational, technocratic approaches to understanding that have long been privileged in our society. Similarly, individuals such as Gardner (1985) and Sternberg (1987) have described multiple forms of intelligence based on

differing natural propensities and varying sociocultural experiences and conditions. An important implication of this work is that because different forms of intelligence serve different but equally important functions, primacy should not be accorded to any particular way of knowing. To the extent that these views seem to challenge the existence of an ultimate source of truth and authority, they too are seen by many as a threat to religion.

One of the greatest challenges to the religious right is the assertion that reality itself is socially constructed and context specific rather than predetermined and absolute (Berger, 1967; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The assumption that ideas (including the concept of God) are created by people rather than people by ideas poses a clear challenge to creationist beliefs, ideologies based on salvation through divine grace, and so forth.

Scholars such as Peshkin (1986) and Provenzo (1990) have argued that ultrafundamentalist perspectives constitute closed belief systems that intentionally shut out external influences perceived as a threat to "Absolute Truth." In his ethnographic study of a Christian fundamentalist school, Peshkin demonstrated that the educational approach was not intended to promote balance and inquiry. Rather, within this setting, schooling was designed to provide students with absolute values and a rigid point of view. Provenzo explains that ultrafundamentalists have increasingly imposed their views on the public schools largely in an effort to regain the status and respect that have gradually eroded over the last several decades:

Although the Social Revolution of the 1960s empowered many individuals, it also diminished the influence and authority of those whose cultural and social values had predominated up until that time. (p. 88)<sup>2</sup>

Thus gradual social changes related to the Age of Reason, the prospect of multiple intelligences, and socially constructed realities have posed a steadily growing threat to narrowly defined religious doctrines. In combination with the demographic and structural changes occurring since the colonization of America, these factors have fueled renewed resistance from the religious right (Kaplan, 1994; Marzano, 1993/1994; McQuaide & Pliska, 1993/1994; Peshkin, 1986; Provenzo, 1990; Slattery, 1995). To the extent that educators have dared address these developments in public schools, opposition has neared the breaking point.

As a result of the volatility and complexity of the debate over religion in public education, many philosophical arguments and legislative actions intended to clarify the issue have actually exacerbated the overall confusion. Depending on where they position themselves, for example, some people currently contend that the First Amendment prohibits all attention to religion

in public education. Others argue that the restriction of religious practice, such as organized prayer in school, violates "the free exercise thereof." The debate has intensified and captured wider interest in the midst of the conservative shift in congressional power and new promises (e.g., Gillespie & Schellhas, 1994) vying for public trust.

To the extent that particular religious perspectives have served the interests of some while restricting opportunities for others, the role of religion in education has become increasingly contentious (Kaplan, 1994; Marzano, 1993/1994; Peshkin, 1986; Provenzo, 1990; Rippa, 1992; Slattery, 1995). And to the extent that the debate has itself exacerbated initial ideological and practical divisions, it is apparent that American educators need to develop new ways of thinking and talking about the relationship between religion and education.

#### RECENT DEVELOPMENTS ON RELIGION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Although most public educators have maintained a distance between sectarian doctrines and public educational systems, this separation has perhaps never before been so vocally and forcefully challenged. Dialogue about the possibility of maintaining the separation of church and state as it relates to the school curriculum has been all but lost in the distance between groups that support the infusion of Christianity in education and those who believe public education must remain responsive to a multiplicity of needs. Nowhere has this debate resounded more loudly than in Pennsylvania's recent furor over Outcomes-Based Education.

Pennsylvania became a forum for debating these issues when the State Board of Education revised its statute, focusing on educational outcomes rather than clock hours. Other states intending to implement similar changes watched the drama unfold as educators and citizens debated the meaning and merit of such outcomes as "tolerance of differences" and "respect for diversity" (McQuaide & Pliska, 1993/1994). Christian fundamentalist organizations from around the country organized to establish a presence at Pennsylvania's public hearings on school change (Kaplan, 1994; McQuaide & Pliska, 1993/1994).

In a less prominent but equally significant case, the Board of Education for the state of New York joined the debate when it permitted the creation of a district coterminous with a Hasidic religious community. The community, and therefore the district, was bound to a particular gender-related religious doctrine. This orthodoxy became an issue when a school bus driver brought charges of discrimination because she was not permitted to pick up and

transport male students to school (*Board of Education of Kiryas Joel Village School District v. Grumet*, 114 S. Ct. 2481 [1993]). The case sparked a vigorous debate over the constitutionality of public support for a system in which the community, and therefore the district, was bound to a particular religious doctrine. Unlike other prominent cases, the Hasidic community represented a minority religious perspective within the United States. Therefore, rather than the familiar issue of protecting minority groups from dominant forms of religious imposition, this case addressed the responsibility of the general public to provide educational environments that do not prohibit religious freedom.

Like other social and philosophical developments, recent cases such as these have contributed to the debate over religion in education. On one hand, the religious right has denounced the left for advocating "immorality, situation ethics, outcomes-based education, sex education without moral values, school-based clinics promoting birth control and abortion, euthanasia, child rights and on and on" (Martin, 1994, p. 7, quoted in Slattery, 1995). On the other hand, the left derides the Christian Right as "the self-appointed conscience of American society. Without its unique brand of divinely inspired goading, its leaders believe, the nation is destined to sink into the compost heaps of atheism and secular humanism" (Kaplan, 1994).

Based on such cases as those in Pennsylvania and New York, many states have begun to ask with renewed concern, Is secularism always the best approach for providing educational services to the general public? Although policy and practice in public education have been heavily influenced by the United States Constitution and subsequent court decisions, it has become increasingly clear that the relation between religion and education is too complex and controversial to be managed by legislation alone.

### *A Sectarian Curriculum in Pennsylvania*

Each year for more than a decade, Pennsylvania's Board of Education has reviewed its public school regulations (Chapters 3, 5, and 6 related to student testing, curriculum, and vocational education, respectively). Few modifications other than those influenced by a continual flow of federal changes attached to titled funding have resulted from those reviews. The state's last attempt to substantially change its regulations was in 1983, following the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). At that time, the state added high school graduation requirements, vocational education requirements, and the monitoring of skills development to its statutes. The requirements included 120 hours of courses, and the monitoring process included basic skills testing in the third, fifth, and eighth grades.

The 1983 changes were later described by the state board as isolated and without thoughtful connections to other parts of the curriculum. There was a 50% decline in vocational education enrollments, a modest increase in higher-level mathematics in the curriculum, and significant increases in attempts to develop lower-level cognitive skills. The majority of students graduated unprepared for college or work. Based on these and related observations, the 1983 modifications were deemed largely ineffective, and in 1989 the board began a statewide attempt to revise the curricular components of its regulations. It combined Chapters 3, 5, and 6 under a new chapter. The new chapter, Chapter 5, included curriculum, student assessment, and vocational education related to curriculum and assessment.

According to its executive director, the Pennsylvania Board of Education spent the 1st year of the 3-year process listening to what people had to say about education in general and education in Pennsylvania in particular. After reviewing the state's regulations, the board asked, What should states regulate? What should be regulated elsewhere? Is it possible to define what constitutes an educated citizen and then design regulations to help produce those citizens?

After extensive internal review and careful consideration of several other states (e.g., Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, and Virginia) engaged in the process of change, the board decided to delineate related learning outcomes for its students. It saw this as a much needed attempt to influence teaching as well as curriculum. The changes were consistent with the state's tradition of home rule and local control of schools. The board convened meetings throughout the state to gather public commentary on its new regulations. At those meetings, constituencies with divergent interests began to emerge. One of the major criticisms of the state board's learning outcomes was that they contained values that many parents and religious groups believed were un-Christian or that should be addressed at home rather than in school.

Whereas the board believed it was appropriate and timely to codify the responsibilities of schools, groups opposing the proposed legislation argued that many of the specified goals represented values that should be optional, decided locally, or taught at home according to parental predilection. They charged the state with attempting to establish a curriculum based on religious secular humanism. Several community groups (e.g., Citizens for Excellence in Education; Pennsylvania Conference for Academic Excellence; Pennsylvania Parents Commission) took aggressive social and political action on behalf of the people they claimed to represent. For example, the Citizens for Excellence in Education disseminated a document containing the following excerpt:

We are Citizens for Excellence in Education in Pennsylvania. We are parents, teachers, businessmen and business women. In short, we are a representative sample of citizens and taxpayers from across the Commonwealth. . . . After analyzing the proposals, we realized the changes suggested by the Board of Education would, in effect, remove local control of our schools from our elected representatives and put it in the hands of the State Board. . . . "Ethical Judgment" and "Adaptability to Change" do not address the lack of literacy skills. Enforcing politically correct views through "Appreciating and Understanding Others" will not assist students acquiring the skills necessary to fill out a job or college application. (Excerpted from a document distributed by Citizens for Excellence in Education/Erie, 1992, p. 1-11)

Another quotation from the same source addressed the issue of secular humanism more directly. It also represents the kind of powerful and menacing images of the board that were being constructed.

The educational system is an efficient means of turning this generation's thinking toward a world community. Can you think of a better way to break the foundations of the family, national sovereignty and belief in God, which, if left in place, would destroy any hope for the fulfillment of a New World Order? Why deal with the wise-to-the-world adult when there are innocent, naive hearts to be had? (Excerpted from a document distributed by Citizens for Excellence in Education/Erie, 1992, p. 11)

Thus, acting on what they believed were religious and spiritual imperatives, parent and religious groups lobbied under the banner of home rule for school prayer and the infusion of Christian values in the curriculum. Finally, in January 1993, after a 3-year development process, the Pennsylvania Board of Education adopted the Outcomes-Based Education regulations (see also Curry, 1994). In the end, the outcomes most closely related to such values as respect and tolerance for others had been significantly modified to comply with the pressures brought to bear by the religious right.

The essential point of the Pennsylvania case is that a relatively small but highly vocal and well-organized group of citizens was able to problematize—and, to an extent, modify—the secular education proscribed by the state. In the next case, the challenge to the separation of church and state came from citizens on both sides of the debate over the role of religion in schooling.

#### *A Sectarian School District in New York*

A less prominent but equally significant case involved a disagreement between the Kiryas Joel Village School District and the New York State School Boards Association. This dispute has a substantial history. The Kiryas Joel Village, located in Orange County, New York, is a religious community



of Satmar Hasidim, practitioners of a strict form of Judaism. Yiddish is the principal language of the Kiryas Joel; television, radio, and English-language publications are not generally used. The dress and appearance of the Hasidim are distinctive. Young men wear side curls, head coverings, and special garments. Both men and women follow prescribed dress codes. The group lives apart from other members of the Monroe-Woodbury School District, and young men and women are educated separately in parochial schools.

From the perspective of the Kiryas Joel, the community's religious practices were jeopardized by secular education. The community needed special education services for its children; however, it maintained that its children could not be sent to public schools where those services were available. To do so violated their religious tenants. To resolve the long-standing dispute over the special needs of the children of Kiryas Joel, the 1989 New York Board of Education established Chapter 748, a compromise reached between this group and the state legislature. A statute was created that permitted the Hasidic community to form the Kiryas Joel Village School District, a public school district whose boundaries were coterminous with the Hasidic religious community.

This action was expected to quiet the dispute; however, it created another. Citizens outside that community believed their rights, ordinarily protected by a government neutral in its treatment of religion, were abridged by this statutorily created parochial school district. Several months before the new district began operation, the New York State School Board Association, along with two individuals named Grumet and Hawk, brought legal action against the state education department and state officials challenging the new statute. The parties charged that the statute violated the national and state constitutions as "an unconstitutional establishment of religion" (*Board of Education v. Grumet*, 114 S. Ct. 2481 [1993]).

On November 29, 1993, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case of the *Board of Education v. Grumet* (114 S. Ct. 2481). The Court's decision to hear the case was viewed as "an opportunity to revamp the strict church-state separation rules it set down in 1971" (*Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 91 S. Ct. 2105, 29 L. Ed. 2d 745) (Weiss, 1993). Although the Court questioned the law as set forth in the *Lemon* decision, there had previously been insufficient agreement to overturn it. Social commentators predicted that with judiciary retirements and the appointment of more conservative judges, the Court would eventually overturn the decision.

The *Lemon* decision provided a three-pronged test to determine whether the establishment clause of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution had been violated. The test questioned whether laws or actions had

"a secular purpose," whether their "principal or primary effect advanc[ed] or inhibit[ed] religion," and whether they resulted in "excessive governmental entanglement with religion" (*Board of Education v. Grumet*, 187 A.D. 2d 16, 592 N.Y.S. 2d 123 [1992]). The Court ruled in favor of the association, Grumet, and Hawk, upholding the doctrine of the separation of church and state.

Attorneys for Kiryas Joel appealed the decision, but it was affirmed on the grounds that Chapter 748, in effect, advanced religion and violated the doctrine of the separation of church and state. Because the district's student population and board members were exclusively Hasidic, "the statute created a 'symbolic union of church and state' that was 'likely perceived by the Satmar Hasidim as an endorsement of their religious choices, or by nonadherents as a disapproval' of their own" (*Board of Education v. Grumet*, 114 S. Ct. 2481 [1993]).

The U.S. Supreme Court granted certiorari and ruled that the statute creating a district coterminous with the village lines violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment (*Board of Education v. Grumet*, 114 S. Ct. 2481 [1993]). The Court's decision was based on a vote of 6 to 3, with Justices Scalia, Rehnquist, and Thomas casting the dissenting votes. Therefore, for the majority of the Court, the expectation that governmental institutions and religious establishments operate in different spheres of public life remains a guiding tenant of American democracy (114 S. Ct. 2481). Government cannot legislate in favor of a particular group, and state and federal roles in the lives of the citizenry are to remain neutral regarding matters of religion that do not violate civil codes. The message from the Court was clear—the separation between church and state will not be bridged in favor of a particular religious sect.

For the purposes of this discussion, the key point of the New York case is that even though the Kiryas Joel community constituted a majority within its district (unlike the religious right in Pennsylvania), its religious practices nonetheless excluded some of its neighbors from full and equal participation in educational services provided through public funds. By rejecting the coterminous status of the Kiryas Joel Village School District, the Court once again upheld the prevailing principle of separation of church and state.

Although the Pennsylvania and New York cases differed in many respects, they were congruent in at least two important ways. First, both cases focused on the central tension between the right of free worship for all citizens and the restriction of those rights by particular groups. In Pennsylvania, the challenge came from Christian fundamentalist groups who believe secular curriculum practices have taken schooling far afield of their own religious doctrines. Although the Kiryas Joel Village did not attempt to impose its

beliefs on its neighbors, the exclusion of its neighbors from the district brought local and state government into religious affairs and technically jeopardized the education of any citizen whose religious practices were not represented.

The second similarity is that a concerted and highly effective effort was made in each case to use the state's policy venues to question the role of religion in public education. In essence, both cases served to politicize and once again direct public attention to the issue of religion in education. Although the principle of separation of church and state was ultimately upheld in each of these cases, the tensions have not subsided and the debate remains clearly unresolved.

### *Current Challenges and Questions*

Whereas the religious right may envision the development of an immoral society created by the imposition of undesirable values such as tolerance and secular humanism, others from the left fear a future in which our country, like other nations, may be divided along religious rather than political party lines. In such a time, new liberals would be individuals advocating religious freedom for all Americans. Such concerns continue to grow today as the vocal and ever-present group to the right of the American mainstream is courted by conservative politicians, such as the proponents of the *Contract With America* (Gillespie & Schellhas, 1994).

Although the *Contract With America* (Gillespie & Schellhas, 1994) does not specifically include school prayer, a school prayer amendment has been developed as a collateral proposal (Hasson & Manuro, 1994, p. 3A). In the meantime, silent prayer is the preferred forum for challenging the separation of church and state. Whereas these mandates come at high costs (e.g., a teacher in Georgia was fired for ignoring his district's silent prayer statute, and a principal in Mississippi was fired for his efforts to support school prayer) (Hasson & Manuro, 1994, p. 3A), the larger point is that challenges to the separation of church and state persist in spite of recent court cases, such as those in Pennsylvania and New York.

Significant considerations crowd the discussion on secular education. Who will pray? How will they pray? What happens to individuals who choose not to pray or to bear witness to others' acts of prayer? Furthermore, how can advocates on both sides safeguard against distilling the act to an essential Americanism akin to saluting the flag, with refusal considered an act of treason?

If schools educate for citizenship, who defines citizenship in contemporary American society? Does that definition include tolerance for differences? Where do lessons of citizenship and tolerance begin? Whether they begin at home or at school, schools eventually play an important role in those lessons.

In summary, the current debate over religion in education appears to represent polar extremes. On one hand, the fear of inculcation of particular religious views has justifiably reinforced the doctrine of the separation of church and state in cases such as those in Pennsylvania and New York. However, precisely because the issue is so intense, complex, and socially embedded, the debate over the role of religion in public education cannot simply be legislated away. Given the pervasiveness of the problem, the relationship between religion and education must ultimately be addressed in a language that leads to the consideration of new possibilities. Thus the final section of this article offers a framework for a language of possibility for addressing religion in public education.

#### TOWARD A MODERATE SECULARISM: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Among the numerous approaches that might be used to address the relationship between religion and education, neither of the extreme alternatives (i.e., inculcation of particular religious values or complete separation of church and state) seems acceptable. On one hand, it is inappropriate to use public education within a democratic and pluralistic society as a forum for inculcating morality. On the other hand, in a nation of citizens whose lives have been deeply influenced by varying religious perspectives, it is evident that spirituality should be addressed in *some* capacity. Within such a society, it is difficult to imagine any credible program of social education (e.g., history, sociology) that does not include thoughtful examination of the role of religion in human experience. The challenge is to develop an approach equally responsive to those who believe religion must be included in public education and those who view religion in school as potentially dangerous.

Beyond modifying school curricula and instruction and beyond even the restructuring of governance and management systems, the problem of addressing religion in education calls for a fundamental restructuring of the debate itself. Like all substantive reformations, reforming the policies and practices of religion in education will require the development of a "language of possibility" (Giroux, 1985).

Between the extremes of sectarian indoctrination and hands-off secular alternatives, it is possible to conceive of a third possibility that might be referred to as a moderate secularism. Such an alternative would neither be sectarian (insofar as it is would not be partisan) nor secular (insofar as it would not abstain from meaningful spiritual investigation and religious inquiry). A moderate secularism could serve to initiate a dialogue of possibility for policy and practice.

Recognizing the fundamental importance of spiritual life to many Americans, a moderate secularism would embrace rather than avoid discussions about religion in the classroom. New York City's Rainbow Curriculum is an example of a recent educational reform effort that pushed toward a more rigorous and comprehensive critique of the dominant social norms underlying religious (and other) traditions without actually "teaching" religion. Similarly, Noddings (1992) has addressed the possibility of investigating various aspects of religion and spirituality through the reconceptualization of social studies curriculum and instruction. Consistent with these examples, a moderate secularism would reject the advocacy of specific religious perspectives while promoting critical investigation into the nature of spirituality itself and authentic inquiry into the philosophical aspects of various forms of religion.

Several highly interrelated themes are central to the notion of a moderate secularism. First and most important, a moderate secularism in public education would include spiritual inquiry. Rather than sanitizing the curriculum with politically safe and unambiguous (and therefore unchallenging) information, substantive religious inquiry would be an essential part of public education. This would be reflected in policy and practice deliberations extending from daily instruction to state-level board meetings.

This first theme, the inclusion of religious inquiry in the school curriculum, cannot exist without four additional themes—plurality, equality, inquiry, and authenticity—that contextualize and support the original premise. A moderate secularism recognizes that pluralistic societies, such as our own, reflect a variety of needs and concerns as well as multiple intelligences and ways of knowing. Within such a society, it is necessary to address the needs of all groups and individuals. This is perhaps best achieved by valuing and nurturing rather than seeking to standardize (e.g., through cultural assimilation) (Banks, 1987; Ogbu, 1987) the multiple intelligences and perspectives represented in our society. Just as a plurality of perspectives and abilities in community polity can provide a basis for national strength and mutual well-being, serious academic inquiry into a variety of religious perspectives can broaden, strengthen, and otherwise facilitate social development and personal growth.

In addition to investigating different religious views and issues from a variety of perspectives, moderate secularism is also egalitarian. Therefore, no religious perspective should be more heavily represented than the others. A moderate secularism would reject from the outset the assumption that religious representation in the curriculum should be commensurate with the given community, school, or classroom population.

Consistent with the principles of constructivist learning theory, a moderate secularism assumes that psychological development involves contemplating

ideas that differ from one's existing beliefs (Kamii, 1984; Piaget, 1972). Applied to the study of religion, this suggests that Christians, Jews, Muslims, agnostics, atheists, and so forth would each benefit by struggling to understand the arguments of the others. Insofar as the goal is education through critical inquiry rather than uncritical indoctrination, a moderate secularism would strive for a balanced representation of religious perspectives regardless of the prevailing religious orientations within the local community.

Beyond advocating balanced investigation of a variety of religious issues and orientations, a moderate secularism would focus on inquiry rather than application. The overall focus would be academic in nature. Rather than learning particular practices, the explicit focus would be to gain a better understanding of the philosophical orientations, premises, histories, and struggles of a variety of religious traditions. Instead of concentrating on specific rituals and routines, educators would help their students examine broader concepts of spirituality and historical religious developments across varied social and cultural settings.

Finally, moderate secularism is authentic. It is not an attempt to debunk religion through scientific investigation or to ridicule one orientation while exalting another. A moderate secularism must operate from a position of humility rather than certainty. Thus, with other educational dilemmas (Giroux, 1985), a moderate secularism would seek to balance a language of critique with a language (and attitude) of possibility. Diverse perspectives would be presumed meritorious based on the insights they provide about the beliefs and actions of various individuals and groups in society. To the extent that religion influences the views and actions of countless members of society, meaningful education requires attention not only to a variety of social, cultural, and political perspectives but to alternative religious orientations as well.

Thus a moderate secularism embodies at least five fundamental themes: (a) inclusion rather than the avoidance of religion in education; (b) plurality of religious orientations based on the premises of constructed realities and multiple ways of knowing; (c) equal representation and investigation of these approaches regardless of the particular makeup of the community; (d) explicit focus on philosophical investigation rather than practical application; and (e) a standard of authenticity that balances the attitudes of critique and possibility. Each of these themes represents a necessary part of the whole. In the absence of any of these, moderate secularism would not exist.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The moderate secularism we have described differs from typical approaches in public education. Rather than omitting religion from the curricu-

lum as is usually the case, moderate secularism advocates serious and sustained attention to the study of religion. Unlike existing situations, such as Outcomes-Based Education in Pennsylvania and Kiryas Joel in New York, in which religious preferences and biases are perpetuated through acts of omission and commission, moderate secularism advocates thoughtful and balanced inquiry into a variety of spiritual issues and perspectives. No local perspective would be excluded (as the opponents of Outcomes-Based Education sought to do by omitting discussions of values), nor would public funds be used to support the privileging of one orientation over another (as was the case with the Kiryas Joel Village School District). Authentic, academic inquiry into a variety of religious perspectives, histories, and social conditions would serve as the basis for the religious curriculum in public education.

Each of the themes—inclusion, plurality, egalitarianism, inquiry, and authenticity—is significant for policy making and practice in public education. For example, the principle of inclusion implies that religion should be considered both in governance meetings and in curriculum development and lesson planning. Based on the principles of inclusion and authenticity, religious fundamentalists (such as the opponents of Outcomes-Based Education) could be assured that many of their views would be addressed in meaningful ways in the curriculum. On the other hand, the principles of plurality and equality would help assure that the same groups could not veto the inclusion of perspectives (e.g., tolerance) that diverge from their own ideals. Although their “absolute” belief systems might prevent many ultrafundamentalists from choosing to participate in any form of public education that affirms diversity and mutual respect, the essential point is that they *could* choose to participate and that their views would be examined with the same care and scrutiny as any other religious orientation.

The issue of religion in education is as important today as it was during the settlement of the “New World.” As the nation has gradually evolved, the issue has become progressively complex and ideological divisions increasingly intense. The escalation of the debate over religion in public education suggests that educators can ill-afford to ignore this important matter. Although court decisions establish important parameters, they cannot address the countless differences in perspective and practice that characterize a nation such as our own. The alternative to ignoring the situation is to address it, and the alternative to endless oppositional debate is the development of a language of possibility for addressing religion in education.

Moderate secularism, as a framework for philosophical inquiry and a mechanism for policy making and practice, allows for the development of a more comprehensive approach for coping with the difficult religious issues facing our changing society. A moderate secularism acknowledges the need

to study rather than avoid the influence of spirituality on the lives of Americans. At the same time, it recognizes that a democratic society must never concede to the imposition of particular religious perspectives and practices on its pluralistic body. Like all proposals addressing difficult educational issues, the views we have expressed will require further dialogue. It is our hope that the concept of a moderate secularism will help generate such dialogue and promote a meaningful exploration of new possibilities for the role of religion in public education.

#### NOTES

1. It is important to note that Jefferson considered himself a religious person. His concerns had more to do with the potential for governmental abuse of religion than with the mere existence of religious perspectives and practices.

2. While acknowledging the problems "absolute" belief systems pose for public education within a pluralistic and democratic society, both Peshkin (1986) and Provenzo (1990) contend that the continued existence of alternative perspectives—even closed perspectives, such as those of the ultrafundamentalist—is an important testimony to the health of the ideological plurality within our nation.

#### REFERENCES

- Baldwin, J. (1988). A talk to teachers. In R. Simonson & S. Walker (Eds.), *The Graywolf Annual Five: Multicultural literacy*. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf.
- Banks, J. A. (1987). The social studies, ethnic diversity, and social change. *The Elementary School Journal*, 87, 531-543.
- Banks, J. A. (1989). Integrating the curriculum with ethnic content: Approaches and guidelines. In J. A. Banks & C. A. McGee Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (pp. 189-206). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Berger, P. L. (1967). *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion*. New York: Anchor.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York: Anchor.
- Board of Education of Kiryas Joel Village School District v. Louis Grumet et al. and Board of Education of Monroe-Woodbury Central School District v. Louis Grumet et al. 114 S. Ct. 2481, 129 L. Ed. 2d 546, 62 USLW 4665, 91 Ed. Law Rep. 810, 187 A.D. 2d 16, 592 N.Y.S. 2d 123 (1993).
- Citizens for excellence in education. (1992). [Document circulated during public hearings on outcomes-based education conducted by Pennsylvania Board of Education, Philadelphia.]
- Cremin, L.A. (1977). *Traditions of American education*. New York: Basic Books
- Curry, B. K. (1994). The dissident voice and school change. *Educational Planning: The Journal of the International Society for Educational Planning*, 9 (4), 3-13.
- Gardner, H. (1985). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gillespie, E. & Schellhas, B. (Eds.). (1994). *Contract with America: The bold plan by Rep. Newt Gingrich, Rep. Dick Armey, and the House of Republicans to change the nation*. New York: Random House.



- Giroux, H. A. (1985, May). Teachers as transformative intellectuals. *Social Education*, 376-379.
- Greene, M. (1988). *The dialectic of freedom*. New York & London: Teachers College Press.
- Hasson, J., & Manuro, T. (1994, November 15). GOP targeting school prayer. *USA Today*, p. 3A.
- Kamii, C. (1984, February). Autonomy: The aim of education envisioned by Piaget. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 410-415.
- Kaplan, G. R. (1994). Shotgun wedding: Notes on public education's encounter with the New Christian Right. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 75(9), K1-K12.
- Kohl, H. (1988). *Thirty-six children*. New York: Penguin.
- Lemon v. Kurtzman, 403 U.S. 602, 91 S. Ct. 2105, 29 L. Ed. 2d 745.
- Martin, E. B. (1994). Left has its zealots too [Letter to the editor]. *The Times of Acadiana*.
- Marzano, R. J. (1993/1994). When two worldviews collide. *Educational Leadership*, 51(4), 6-11.
- McQuaide, J., & Pliska, A.-M. (1993/1994). The challenge to Pennsylvania's education reform. *Educational Leadership*, 51(4), 16-21.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ogbu, J. (1987). Opportunity structure, cultural boundaries, and literacy. In Judith A. Langer (Ed.), *Language, literacy and culture: Issues of society and schooling* (pp. 149-177). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Peshkin, A. (1986). *God's choice: The total world of a fundamentalist Christian school*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Piaget, J. (1972). *The principles of genetic epistemology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Provenzo, E. F. (1990). *Religious fundamentalism and American education: The battle for the public schools*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rippa, S. A. (1992). *Education in a free society: An American history*. New York: Longman.
- Slattery, P. (1995). Understanding political-religious resistance and pressure. *Childhood Education*, 20, 266-269.
- Sternberg, R. J. (1987). Second game: A school's-eye view of intelligence. In Judith A. Langer (Ed.), *Language, literacy, and culture: Issues of society and schooling*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Weiss, E. (Executive Producer). (1993, November 29). *All things considered*. Washington, DC: National Public Radio.
- Zinn, H. (1990). *A people's history of the United States*. New York: Harper & Row.